HOCKEY BREAKOUT DRILLS

by Coach Mathew Fortin
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Ice Hockey Breakout Drills

A breakout in hockey is a sudden attack by a team that has been defending. This event means that your team has gained control of the puck in your own defensive zone. The breakout plays allow teams to get the puck into scoring range while taking advantage of their strengths.

There are many different breakout plays considered essential to a player’s knowledge, and we will examine some of these drills in the following pages. The 10 breakout drills provided are organized according to difficulty, with the easiest at the beginning.

The first drill works on accurate skating with the puck and becoming comfortable with the responsibility of the puck while passing and skating. The later drills introduce reverse breakouts and the role that goalies can play in a breakout play, as well as the appearance of forecheckers and how to handle them.

This guide contains material suitable for all youth hockey programs and places an emphasis on three things:

- Accurate passing
- Good communication between the defensemen
- Control of the puck up the ice

By choosing three skills to push, coaches can teach athletes not only the physical routine of a breakout play but also how to translate the skills needed for that play into other areas of hockey. Suddenly, a breakout drill becomes good training ground for other, more difficult drills and plays.

The drills presented here are meant to be repeated during practices so that all athletes get the chance to experience all aspects of the drill. If possible, move athletes around so that they take part in the drill in different ways. This helps them respect the different responsibilities in a breakout play as well as promotes good communication.

The drills are broken down by a description of the drill, the materials you need for it, how it works, and the results it should bring about. You can read the guide front-to-back or skip around as necessary until you find drills appropriate for your players’ skills and needs.
Zig Zag Pass

This is an excellent beginning drill for those players who need work moving the puck up the ice. It is a basic warm-up drill for more advanced teams before they begin with more complicated breakout drills.

What you need: Players line up in the right corner of the rink. Two players (Player 1 and Player 2) move to the right boards, with several paces between them. Every player needs a stick, and you need as many pucks as there are players in the corner.

How this drill works: The first player in the corner takes a puck and begins skating toward center ice. Before reaching Player 1, the skater with the puck passes to Player 1 and keeps skating. Player 1 will pass back to the skating player, who will then pass to Player 2 and keep skating. Player 2 will pass back to the skating player, who will then be in place for a shot on goal. The skating player can take a shot, but does not have to.

This drill mimics a zigzag pattern. Though the skating player is moving diagonally toward the opposite corner of the rink, the passes are moving toward the boards, away from the boards, toward the boards, away from the boards. Because the skating player is always moving up the ice, the passes naturally form a zigzag pattern.

This drill can be modified several ways for speed and convenience. As soon as the first skating player receives the puck back from Player 1, another player from the corner can begin. This will mean that there are two skating players on the ice at any time.

You can also split the ice lengthwise and double the drill, meaning that you will have four players receiving passes (Players 1, 2, 3, and 4) as well as two corners with skaters waiting to take their turn.

The point of this drill is to practice crisp passing and movement up the ice. The skating player should aim to pass directly to Player 1’s stick, not just to their general direction. The skating player should also work on skating away from the puck after passing it and being prepared to take control of it again once Player 1 passes it back.

Results: Players will learn crisp passing and movement up the ice. This drill encourages players to move the puck and skate away from it after passing it. It also improves total-body coordination and passing accuracy.

Breakout Basics

This drill introduces athletes to the basic movements of the breakout play, including passing and moving up the ice. This is a sequential drill, so when one person is done playing one position, they rotate to the next position.

What you need: A goalie and center for defense; a right wing, center, and defenseman with the puck.

How this drill works: Most skaters line up along the boards. There is a right winger in place on the boards with a center nearby. There is a goalie in place.
The defenseman on the boards with the puck rims the puck to the right winger. While the defenseman is passing, the center comes down near the corner, closer to the goalie than the winger. Both the winger and the center begin skating up the ice, and the winger passes the puck to the center.

The center skates up the ice on a breakaway toward the empty net. The center then turns back down the ice and shoots the puck toward the defended goal, while the defensive center attempts to block the shot.

After shooting the puck, the center joins the line at the corner. The right winger now becomes the center, and the defenseman who had the puck originally becomes the right winger.

This drill can be run with two pucks in play. As the center cuts back down the ice and takes a shot on goal, the next puck can enter play and all the players can rotate to their new positions.

After five minutes, the skaters should switch sides, so that everyone gets a chance to play offense and defense.

Result: Players learn the very basics of a breakout play, which include rimming the puck to a teammate, passing it, and moving it up the ice. In concert, these actions teach athletes to pay attention to their surroundings, make neat, accurate passes, and understand the choreography of a breakout play.

Backward Pivot

This drill teaches teammates to maintain eye contact and coordinate activities to get the puck up the ice and past a defender. It also promotes proper passing and total-body coordination of skating with the puck.

What you need: Three players with sticks and one puck.

How this drill works: The Defender starts with the puck and skates behind the net. The Forward skates in front of the net and diagonally (essentially skating down the ice toward his own net and diagonally to the left, from his perspective), in order to meet the Defender as he comes around the net.

When the Forward reaches the right circle, he pivots and begins heading up the ice toward the right boards. When he pivots, the Forward will need to turn backwards so that he is always facing the Defender. This means the Forward will go from skating forward down the ice to the right circle to skating backward toward the right boards, in order to face the Defender at all times.

As the Defender comes around the net, he passes the puck to the Forward, who is now skating backward and waiting for the pass.

Upon receiving the pass, the Forward breaks down the ice and goes head-to-head with a defender on the opposing team.
**Results:** With this drill, players learn to read each other’s movements and place passes appropriately. They also build their basic skating and puck-handling skills while learning to push forward offensively against a defender.

When working on passing, skaters should alternate between making passes to hit the center’s stick or their skates, depending on what the coach instructs.

**Recommended Resource**

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**Up the Center**

This drill takes advantage of the distance between the defensive player who has gotten the puck and the other team’s lack of forecheckers. It is one of the most basic breakout skills.

**What you need:** You need a goalie, a net, a defender, a forechecker, a center, and four wings. The forechecker and one wing should be on one “team,” and the center and the other wing should be on the other “team.” Every player will need a stick, and the teams need one puck total.

**How this drill works:** The goalie defends the area while the defensive player (D) gains control of the puck in their own defensive zone—near the goalie.

D skates toward center ice, taking advantage of the fact that there is no forechecker pursuing them. D passes the puck to the center (C). C passes quickly to a wing (W). W pushes across the ice and into scoring range.

You should instruct D to make a short, tight pass to C. The focus should be on accuracy and control, because a sloppy pass allows the other team to steal the puck back right in front of the net—right where they need it.

In an alternate method, D can pass directly to W with a longer pass into the neutral zone. The problem with long passes is that they are often less accurate, and inaccurate passing can kill a breakout play.

**Results:** This drill is a good building block for other breakout drills and should be practiced frequently. It teaches D to come around the net and up the side, as well as teaches disciplined short passing.
**Breakout with Forecheckers**

This drill introduces athletes to the idea of forecheckers impeding their progress with the puck. The drill focuses on accurate passing and not allowing the forecheckers to regain control of the puck in front of the net.

**What you need:** The coach stands at center ice with several pucks. There is a defenseman, a forechecker, a center, and a wing.

**How this drill works:** The coach begins by shooting the puck to the corner. The defenseman retrieves the puck in the corner and skates behind the net as the forechecker moves in to slow his progress. The defenseman then skates toward center ice if he can break free of the forechecker. If the forechecker is following too closely, the defenseman passes to the center, who is near the boards in the defensive zone.

The center then passes quickly to the wing, who is already in the neutral zone. The wing pushes up the ice and into offensive territory.

If the defenseman can get away from the forechecker, he can pass either to the center or to the wing, who is in the neutral zone. Players should alternate passes to practice both long and short passes.

If the center receives the puck, he passes quickly to the wing. The wing then pushes up the ice in order to take a shot.

**Results:** By alternating long and short passes from the defenseman to either the center or the wing, you help prepare your team for different game scenarios. The ability to bypass the center and pass directly to the wing may confuse the opponent and allow your team more time for regrouping and moving up the ice.

This drill also teaches disciplined passing, because anything other than accurate passes leaves the door open for the forechecker to steal the puck in front of the net, making it easy for him to score.

**Three-Man Drive**

This drill involves more players than the previous drill, because it requires the coordination of three players down the ice. This drill focuses on quick, accurate passing and pressure in the offensive zone.

It is a more complex drill than the Up the Center drill because of several quick passes. This drill will require repetition and practice before Players 1, 2, and 3 feel comfortable in the routine.

**What you need:** For this drill, you need a goalie, a center, and three offensive players. Each player needs a stick, and the team needs one puck.
How this drill works: Player 1 takes the puck and skates behind the net on their own defensive end. Player 2 is on the right-side boards, waiting to receive the puck from Player 1. 1 passes to 2, and 1 begins to break down the middle. Player 2 quickly passes back to Player 1, while Player 3, who has been on the left-side boards, continues down the ice.

Player 1, who has been skating down center ice, passes to Player 3, who is skating down the left side. Player 2 continues down the right side, beginning to put pressure on the players’ offensive area.

While Player 3 has the puck, Players 1 and 2 push down the ice, breaking toward the net. They encounter the Center, who will be blocking Player 1’s shot.

Player 3, now in the left circle, passes back to Player 1, who is lined up directly in front of the net. Player 2 is in place near the net to try to rebound. Player 1 takes a shot, and Players 2 and 3 get ready to rebound. The Center attempts to block Player 1’s shot and the Goalie defends against the shot and the rebounds.

Results: This drill will develop teamwork and coordination. It focuses on teaching passing skills while skating, and it requires athletes to be aware of their teammates’ positions. With this drill, players will be more prepared to react when they receive the puck in their defensive end, because the drill walks them through every move, from recovering the puck to taking a shot and rebounding.

Goalie Breakout Drill

This drill focuses on the reality that the goalie may often have the opportunity to become offensive players by stopping shots around the boards and passing them back to teammates. This drill encouraged goalies to be proactive about getting involved, instead of waiting for defensive teammates to begin play.

What you need: The team splits in half, on either board. The goalie is in position, with the coach in the neutral zone with several pucks.

How this drill works: The coach begins by hitting the puck around the boards. Instead of waiting for a defenseman to pick up the puck, the goalie leaves the net and retrieves it, passing to a waiting teammate on the left boards. The goalie moves back into position in front of the net.

The skater with the puck makes a cross-ice pass to the other line, where other forwards are waiting. The right forward shoots, either from the sideboard or after skating in front to get closer to the net.

The right forward skates to the back of the other line after shooting the puck.

The goalie controls the puck and passes it to the left forward. The drill repeats itself, with the left forward cross-ice passing to the right forward, who then takes a shot and switches lines.
Results: The goalie gets great practice at controlling shots on goal, passing them out quickly, and aiding the team offensively. He also tests his reflexes and increases his speed while decreasing reaction time. The forwards get practice with cross-ice passes and shots from the front and from the boards.

**Criss-Cross Breakout**

This half-ice drill incorporates a breakout pass, a 2-on-1 offense, and passing practice. This is a good warm-up drill before a game, as well as an educational drill for regular use in practice.

**What you need:** Several pucks behind the goalie net. You also need a goalie and several skaters lined up on either sideboard as forwards, as well as small groups of defensemen in either corner.

**How this drill works:** A defenseman from the left corner skates behind the net to pick up the puck. He then passes it to the first forward in line at the right sideboard. The forward, now with the puck, skates up the ice, as does his counterpart on the left sideboard.

The forward with the puck makes a short, quick pass to the other forward. The two forwards then criss-cross each other, skating down the ice back toward the goalie. The defenseman who originally had the puck defends against them as they create a 2-on-1 scenario.

When the forwards take a shot at the goalie with the defenseman defending, the forwards join the group of defensemen and the defenseman joins a line of forwards. At this time, the drill starts over, with the right-side defenseman taking the puck first.

Results: This drill pushes the coordination and teamwork of the two forwards, requiring them to know at all times where the other is, especially during the criss-cross and passing parts of the drill. Through this experience, the goalie will improve his goaltending, the defenseman will get practice defending against two forwards, and the forwards will gain passing and puck-handling experience.

**Long Pass Breakout**

This drill differs from many other presented here because it includes a long pass in the activity, requiring more accuracy and timing than a drill with only short passes.
What you need: The coach has several pucks in the neutral zone. The goalie is in place in front of the net, and there are two players on the sideboards at each side, stationed at center ice.

How this drill works: The coach shoots a puck to the goalie, who then places it behind the net. A defender from the left sideboard skates behind the net to pick up the puck. Forward 1, who was on the right sideboard at center ice, skates down the ice toward the defender and the puck.

The defender passes the puck to Forward 1 in a short pass. At this point, Forward 1 and the defender should be in the right circle.

Forward 1 shoots a long pass to Forward 2, who is at center ice on the left sideboard. Forward 2 skates along the left boards and to the left circle. Forward 3, who was on the right sideboard, cuts across the ice to come near Forward 2 in the left circle.

Forward 2 passes to Forward 3, who is then positioned for a shot at the net.

To make this drill more difficult, the defender and Forward 1 can become forecheckers after finishing their parts. This forces the other forwards to plan for pressure and support each other.

Results: This drill is designed to improve passing, especially long passing. Coaches should focus on tape-to-tape passes, which should be clean, on target, and fast. The drill is also designed to help skaters read their teammates and the defense, if you include the option of forecheckers. It forces total-ice cooperation by requiring the team to support the skater in control of the puck.

Reverse Breakout Drill

In this drill, the defensemen pick up the puck behind the net but then pass it behind them, switching up the normal routine for a breakout pattern. This drill requires excellent communication between defensemen and should be practiced often so that athletes feel comfortable using this play in competition.

What you need: The coach should be at center ice with several pucks. Two defensemen are in the neutral zone, near the boards at either side. If desired, you can have a goalie.
should also post two forwards at the boards next to the circles at the same end.

How this drill works: The coach shoots wide of the net and forces the puck around the boards, behind the goalie. A defenseman skates to pick it up. As the defenseman gains control of the puck, the other defenseman yells for a reverse. At this point, the puck controller should be almost past the net on the other side.

The puck controller then has to pass behind him. The second defenseman skates to get the puck and immediately passes to the forward nearest him. The forward passes back to the defenseman who passed to him, and the defenseman pushes up the ice near the coach.

The goalie is involved here only to learn communication with the defensemen. He can be the one to call for a reverse if desired.

Results: The reverse breakout drill is difficult for young athletes to master, so it will require repetition and heavy focus on timing. This drill should be taught with the intention of improving communication among the defense, because this drill does not work without good communication.

This drill will result in greater flexibility among the defense. It is useful because it breaks up the expected pattern and gives your defense a chance to confuse the offense, giving you more time to push the puck out of your defensive territory.

Conclusion

The breakout is one of the most basic plays for a hockey team to know and understand, and there are many variations that teams can use to keep their opponents guessing. The drills provided here are designed to be used in practice, as well as in warm-up scenarios at a competition, where appropriate.

Many of these drills focus on the same skills: accurate passing, moving the puck up the ice, and communication between defenders. These three basic skills form the backbone of breakout plays as well as other, more difficult moves that are built on the basic breakout pattern.

The drills provided in this guide can be practiced daily, and all players involved should get experience in each position. Though it may seem advantageous to build comfort in one role, athletes need the exposure and experience in each position before they will be fully able to dedicate themselves to one role on the team.

For breakout drills and all other hockey drills, the coach must begin with excellent communication, describing the basics of the drill, what it will help the athletes to do, and why it is important. By bringing the athletes into the discussion process, coaches will find a more focused, energetic team than if they coached in a more aloof style.
Regardless of your chosen coaching style, incorporating breakout drills into regular practice is a fantastic way to educate your athletes on effective methods of retrieving the puck and moving it from defensive to offensive territory. By learning how to do these drills, athletes will also learn how to defend against the breakout when an opponent uses such a play in competition.

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